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AN APPRAISAL OF
AURICULAR CONFESSION

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by

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I commend to you what is called "going to confession" or "sacramental confession," the method whereby you confess your sins audibly in the presence of the priest, and receive from him audibly Christ's absolution. . . . It is a method thorough, painful, decisive, full of comfort. . . . Do not fear that it is an introspective process. You do not begin or end looking at yourself. You look up to God in thankfulness (always begin there); you expose yourself painfully before Him; and, as you receive forgiveness, you find your thankfulness deepened beyond words because self has suffered a defeat.

"Lord, take my heart from me,
for I cannot give it to thee.
Keep it for Thyself,
for I cannot keep it for Thee.
And save me in spite of myself."

— THE MOST REVEREND A. M. RAMSAY
Archbishop of Canterbury

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CHAPTER **I** INTRODUCTION

IN EVERY man's life there comes a time when he has to face himself as he is. This is both a humiliating and a lonely experience because when one looks at himself honestly, he finds that he has fallen far short of what he knows he should be, and at the same time he also sees that he has in the process somehow become separated from God, his neighbor, and his true self. When one cannot find God, communicate with his neighbor, or be comfortable with himself, he finds that he is lonely — very lonely. The painful thing about coming to a realization of one's inner chaos is that one realizes that his situation of estrangement exists by his own fault and has come about because of his own free choices. It would be so much easier to be able to blame one's condition on other people or upon the circumstances in which one finds himself, but one comes to realize that other people have been subjected to the same circumstances that he has been, and yet they have not succumbed to his failures.

When one comes to a realization of the fact that he is in lonely isolation from others and from himself as he wants to be, he may do many things. He may seek to distract himself from the knowledge of his state by throwing himself into a flurry of activity, trying to forget his lonely state by filling up his vacant time with busy work. He finds, however, that once these activities are over, the old loneliness comes creeping back in again with an even greater force until at last he comes to the point where he cannot even tolerate being by himself but must have the radio or the television playing for diversion so that he will not have to dwell with his own thoughts. One's problems, however, have a tendency to increase the more one tries to repress them, much as an inflated balloon rises to the surface with more force the deeper it is held beneath the surface of the water. Another way that a man may react towards his lonely state of

separation is to seek out the aid of a psychiatrist. This is valuable sometimes in that a psychiatrist can help one to see himself as he is and to clarify the cause of his guilt; sometimes he can even alleviate a false sense of guilt. But what about *real* guilt? What can a psychiatrist do in a case where the individual sees his separated state and realizes that it has come about through his own deliberate selfish action and that he is experiencing guilt for sin for which he is fully responsible? A psychiatrist can help one deal with differentiating between illusion and reality, but when one is fully cognizant of the reality that the fault for his separation from God, his neighbor, and himself lies with himself and that he is powerless to do anything to change it, then only God can help. It is only when one comes to a realization of what he has done to isolate himself, acknowledges it and says: "I'm sorry — please help me out of the mess I've gotten myself into" that God can take over. This process is called "confession," and when it is done privately to God in the presence of a priest, it is called "auricular confession"; that is the topic of this paper.

Before proceeding to a discussion of auricular confession, it would be well at this point to note several of the major obstacles which stand in the way of those who make auricular confessions. The primary one of course is pride — the so-called root of all sin. The original cause of sin also becomes the chief obstacle for the forgiveness of sin. There is an old Spanish saying which sums up this problem quite concisely — "the offender never forgives." It is true, the offender finds it difficult because of his pride to forgive either himself for committing a sin or the one whom he has injured who seems by his very innocence to be pointing an accusing finger. Pride which leads to sin is the chief barrier between a man and his forgiveness.

A second obstacle complementary to that of pride is our contemporary Western culture. In our American society we are "success-geared" — everything is looked upon in terms of its apparent success. The result of this is that one is loath to admit failure or to take any kind of responsibility for it when it occurs. The successful businessman for instance finds it difficult to work at cultivating a success-image all week long and then on Sunday to have to get down on his knees and admit that he has failed God "by his own most grievous fault," is a hopeless sinner, and therefore, must cast himself upon the mercy of God for forgiveness. While many see the futility of the "rat-race" up this ladder of success in our society, nevertheless they find that they cannot free themselves from participating in it and become ever more entrenched in its clutches, "powerless of themselves to help themselves."

The third obstacle in making an auricular confession is that it has been connected in the minds of many in our church with the Anglo-Catholic element and so is taboo because of a party-line prejudice for many, if not a majority of Episcopalians. When the Prayer Book of 1549 made auricular confession optional it fell into disuse, much as comprehensive exams would certainly fall into disuse if they were made optional in a college. It was the Anglo-Catholic element in the Nineteenth Century which revived its usage, therefore auricular confession has since been falsely connected with the issue of churchmanship.

While the traditional Anglican position on auricular confession (expressed so well by Canon B. K. Cunningham of Westcott House, Cambridge) has been "all may, some should, none must," nevertheless it remains that we "all should."¹ The reason for

1. Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (London, 1958), p. 425.

taking this position is that Christ said that in order for anyone to truly follow Him he has to first deny himself and take up His cross (Matthew 16:24). The only sure way of denying oneself is to undergo the humiliation of laying out before God all the barriers which our sins impose between ourselves and God and allowing Him to remove them. Martin Luther put it very strongly: he claimed that it is *impossible* for one to become a Christian without first giving up his pride and confessing his sins.² Christ has never offered a short cut to his disciples by which they can follow Him without putting aside the pride which stands between themselves and God. Many feel that the present-day Anglican Church does this by allowing the Christian to "have his cake and eat it too" — he can follow Christ without having to undergo the personal rebirth necessary for the new life in the Spirit. The Church is suffering from dispensing this watered-down salvation in that fewer people are turning to the Church as a source of help in times of trouble; instead they go to their "secular confessors" (psychiatrists and marriage counselors) for an alleviation of what turns out to be in many cases a real sense of guilt for real sin committed for which there is no solution but divine forgiveness. Furthermore the Anglican Church is not even living up to her minimum standards that "all *may*" seek out a minister of God's Word for confession, as there is at present little or no training in seminaries on how to hear a confession, let alone implication that a Christian ought to make them. One hears of many cases in which parishioners approach a priest to ask him to hear a confession, and the priest, not knowing how to hear them, has to refer them to someone else. At ordination the Anglican priest is given the power of the "keys of the kingdom" without the rudimentary knowledge of even how to work the lock! There is much need for education and reform in the Church in this area if the Church is to effectively convey the Gospel of God's merciful forgiveness to this present neurotic and guilt-ridden world. If the Church is going about her task of reconciliation while casting aside the "commonly called sacrament" of penance, she will certainly fail in her mission in the world, in this area, and ultimately in all.

In approaching the study of auricular confession this paper will deal first of all with the development of *private confession* from its Biblical backgrounds up through the history of the Church to the present day. Its present form and matter will then be discussed as the product of this development. Next the theology behind auricular confession will be dealt with in terms of the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation; this will be followed by a chapter dealing with conclusions drawn from this study, which should be applicable to our present situation.

This paper does not purport to be a definitive study of auricular confession, but rather hopes to serve as a means whereby this often neglected channel of God's grace may be used more effectively in breaking down the barriers which stand between man, his neighbor, and his God.

2. John B. Coburn, "Pastoral Theology 122 Lecture delivered at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts, on March 3, 1964.

CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF AURICULAR CONFESSION

LET us now look at the background and origins of confession as found in the Scriptures and in the early Church and trace its historical development to the present day.

The word which is most connected with confession and penance is the Greek word *metanoia* which means "to turn again in a radical way" — much as the "turning away from dead works" which is mentioned in Hebrews 6:1. This word implies something positive and means a dynamic awakening and turning in response to the call of God.¹ It is this act of turning in recognition of God's call that is the basis for many of the parables of Jesus, "the Prodigal Son," for instance. Repentance then involves a positive coming to oneself and turning to God's way which comes as a result of one's being loved. The second aspect of this word is the desire for change. Once one experiences God's love, he feels the desire to forego his former way so that nothing may stand between himself and God. This can be compared to a man's love for a woman in that when one is in love, he feels that he can dispense with his former habits of eating, drinking, and sleeping — even social respectability sometimes — to be with the woman that he loves.² Being repentant is a result of being in love with God and experiencing His love. It is in this context then that the New Testament looks at repentance, and it is the opinion of this writer that later developments of the mechanics of repentance (namely: formal contrition, confession, and satisfaction which are found in auricular confession) are the formalized symptoms of a loving change which may be genuine according to whether the penitent is trying to find forgiving love by imitating the symptoms of such a change, or is showing forth the symptoms because he has indeed found God's love and therefore really wants "to repent him of his former sinful ways" as a result.

In the early Church it was felt that once one turned from his former ways and became a baptized Christian that the change was so traumatic that it admitted of no lapse of the Christian into his former sinful state. Therefore, any Christian who sinned once he had been baptized was excommunicated from the Church forever with no hope of reconciliation or salvation. This was a powerful current of thought in the second century and was based on the Epistle to the Hebrews which reads:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God, and the powers of the age to come, if they then commit apostasy, they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt. (Hebrews 6:4 - 6)

1. Community of San Séverin, *Confession, Meaning and Practice* (Chicago, 1959), p. 43.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

later on in the same epistle is written:

For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries. A man who has violated the law of Moses dies . . . how much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of Grace? For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "the Lord will judge His people." It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:26 - 31)

The main Scriptural quotation upon which the whole penitential system was based, and which came to form the basis behind the rigorist point of view, was the description of what was called "mortal sin" in I John 5:16 f:

If any one sees his brother committing what is not a mortal sin, he will ask, and God will give him life for those whose sin is not mortal. (Literally *pros thanaton*, "unto death.") There is sin which is mortal; I do not say that one is to pray for that. All wrong doing is sin, but there is sin which is not mortal.

This passage differentiates between the sin which cannot be absolved and that which can, and it also implies that there is no need for the prayer to be said by an ordained priest for the man who has committed a sin — but "by anyone who sees his brother committing a sin."

The first hint of a more lenient attitude toward sin is mentioned in the *Shepherd of Hermas* written about 140 A.D.³ While there was judgment for those who committed sins after baptism, yet there was *one* more chance left to a Christian if he sinned after baptism in view of the imminent second coming of the Lord. This penance was to cover even the most deadly of sins (*i.e.*, to attribute to Satan the works of God (Mark 3:28 - 9), not to confess Jesus during persecution (Luke 12:10), and homicide, adultery, and apostasy.⁴) There is no mention here, though, of the penitential system which developed a generation later in the church.⁵

For Tertullian there was a chance for one more repentance after baptism, but this did not apply to the deadly sins of apostasy, adultery, and murder.⁶ Tertullian urged Christians who had sinned to undergo the painful experience of "exomologesis," which was the public confession of one's sins in front of the whole body of the Church. The exomologesis, according to Tertullian, was "not to prevent eternal torments, but rather to cancel them."⁷ The public confession of one's sins was indeed painful but necessary to salvation because it was obvious to Tertullian that one has to humble himself in order to be raised up by God and be forgiven for his sins. He condemns those who are not willing to undergo public confession because of their pride — or as they prefer to call it, modesty:

Most men, however, shun this duty (exomologesis) as involving the public exposure of themselves, or they put it off from day to day, thinking more about their shame, it seems to me, than about their salvation. They are like men who have contracted some disease in the private parts of the body who conceal this from the knowledge of the physicians and thus preserve their

3. Massey Shepherd, Jr., "Hermas, Shepherd of," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York, 1962), p. 583.

4. Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York, 1959), pp. 91-92.

5. Shepherd, *op. cit.*, p. 583.

6. Walker, p. 92.

7. Tertullian, "On Penitence," *Treatises on Penance*, translated by William P. LeSaint (London, 1959) p. 32.

modesty but lose their lives. It is, I suppose, unbearable to shame that it should offer satisfaction to the Lord after He has been offended, and that it should enter once more into the possession of that salvation which has been wasted.⁸

The process of exomologesis in the early Church was a very difficult process to undergo. In the East, it was done in stages; the penitents were divided into classes after their public excommunications for their sins. On the lowest rung of these classes of penitents, which were arranged according to the degree of exclusion which they had in participating in the Divine Liturgy, were the "mourners." The class of mourners were prohibited from ever entering into any part of the church. Instead they waited outside and entreated prayers for their souls of those who went in. In the next class were the "Hearers"; above the "hearers" were the "kneelers" who were permitted to kneel in the west part of the nave during the ante communion but were ordered out with the Catecumens and energumens (mentally ill) before the consecration.⁹ The highest class of penitents were the "bystanders" which could hear the prayer of consecration but could not receive the elements. To preserve secrecy, some who confessed privately were made bystanders for a time and received absolution privately; this was true in cases of adultery where secrecy was necessary. The period of penance for the more serious crimes ranged upwards from fifteen to thirty years.¹⁰

In contrast the Syrian clergy imposed comparatively lighter penances lasting but a few weeks. The Syrian Didascalia (c. 280 A.D.) emphasized the Bishop's right to forgive sins in what may be one of the earliest allusions to the rite of absolution:

When a sinner repents and weeps, receive him; and when the people have prayed for him, lay thy hands on him and allow him henceforth to be in the Church.¹¹

Primarily there were two factors which attacked the rigorist position concerning penitence. The first was the prevalent belief that confessors could grant absolution as well as church officers because they were filled with the spirit by virtue of their undergoing persecution. The confessors were often more lax than the bishops, and so this did much to undermine the strict position of the bishops. The other factor was the cessation of persecution. With the persecutions over, many people who had deserted the Church under pressure now wanted to return to the fold. During the persecutions strict measures for dealing with the lapsed were necessary to preserve discipline, but after the persecutions stopped, they were considered by many to be unnecessarily harsh.¹²

Bishop Kallistos of Rome (217-222) issued a proclamation in his own name that he would absolve people of sins of the flesh upon evidence of a proper repentance. This announcement was a new high in the assertion of papal authority and dealt a death blow to the concept of "sins unto death." Kallistos, however, did not promise remission of sins to the lapsed. It was not until Cyprian in his controversy with the Novatian rigorism that the issue came to any sort of solution. Two councils in Rome and Carthage in 251 and 252 supported Cyprian in his position that the lapsed could be readmitted to the communion of the church after due penitence, which was a

8. Tertullian, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

9. F. L. Cross, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (London, 1958), p. 450.

10. Leonard Geddes, *The Catholic Church and Confession* (New York, 1928), p. 71.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

12. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 72.

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middle position between the rigorist view that the lapsed had to remain excommunicated all their lives and the confessor's view that they could be admitted almost automatically with little or no penitence. This decision in Rome in 251, though disregarded many times during subsequent persecutions, was ultimately to become normative — there were to be no more "sins unto death" except in name only after this time.¹³

The council of Elvira which was held in Spain about the years 303-306 furnishes us with a clue of further development toward auricular confession in the early Church. The Council can best be classified as a rigorist council passing very strict canons dealing especially with apostasy and adultery, even prescribing life-long excommunication without hope of reconciliation for some offenses. However, the interesting factor to note about this council is that several of the canons provide for temporary excommunication without provision for *public* penance.¹⁴ Canon 46 for instance declares that an excommunication of ten years is imposed for apostasy, and after which duration of time, the penitent may again receive communion. There is no mention of a public ceremony or the formal granting of absolution. As Mortimer notes:

if there was no absolution, then what we have here is only a temporary suspension or even voluntary withdrawal from communion for a limited period at the expiration of which the sinner automatically resumed his place at the Holy Mysteries.¹⁵

While this is not private penance as such, this can be viewed as a step in that direction in its departure from the usual custom in the ancient Church of public exomologesis. After seeing this trend in the conservative rigorist church in Spain, we can now turn back and see its development along slightly different lines during the time of Origen.

Origen, in about the year 244 writes:

Only look about thee carefully . . . for the person to whom thou shouldest confess thy sin. First make sure of the physician to whom thou shouldest lay bare the cause of thy ailment, who knows how to be infirm with the infirm to weep with those who weep — so that if he shall have given any counsel thou wilt act upon it and wilt follow it; if he have understood and foreseen that thine ailment is such as needs to be exposed and to be cured in the gathering of the whole church, from which it may be that others, too, can be edified and thyself readily healed, this will have to be arranged with much deliberation and the experienced counsel of that physician.¹⁶

Two things may be inferred from the above quotation of Origen. The first, according to Geddes, is that the confession was to be public or private according to the discretion of the priest, and the second is that there is pressure put on the penitent to choose his confessor wisely. These two inferences can be given several different interpretations. The first can either mean that the priest could choose private or public confession for the penitent as he saw fit, or it could mean that this is an indication of the beginning of pastoral counseling and the priest was to decide whether or not it was a matter for *counseling* or for public confession. (The differences between pastoral counseling and confession will be dealt with in a later chapter.) While a good case can be made for either position, it is probable that pastoral counseling is meant and not private confession. Public confession continued, through the fourth and fifth centuries, and

13. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

14. R. C. Mortimer, *Origins of Private Penance* (Oxford, 1939), p. 45.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Origen, In Psalmum 37, II 6., quoted in Leonard Geddes, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

even as late as the time of Ambrose (340-392) confession was something which was to be undergone only once in a lifetime. Ambrose does assert that forgiveness can be pronounced, however, against the Novationist position that it could not. He also contends that the Church's power to remit sins rests on exactly the same authority with which it has been given to baptize,¹⁷ but "just as there is one baptism, so there is but one public penance."¹⁸

J. N. D. Kelly feels that there is no private penance during the Fourth Century. He feels that the only form of penance which penitents perform apart from exomolosis are the prayers and fasting which are done to remove venial sins. During this period, Augustine writes about certain "medicines of rebukes" which are private exhortations and are performed to help the penitent prepare himself for a public penance.¹⁹

The break in the feeling that there could be only one penance after baptism came from the East, notably in the figure of St. John Chrysostom, who was from Antioch in Syria. St. Chrysostom came under criticism from the Novationists by suggesting that everyone who showed true contrition of heart should be granted absolution as often as he needed it. While St. Chrysostom's position was very shocking to many in the West, it was not so shocking to those in the notably-lax East, as we have previously noted.²⁰

This feeling had gradually come to pervade the Western Church also, and Pope Innocent I (402-417) after excommunicating the Emperor Arcadius for driving St. John Chrysostom out of his See²¹ decreed in a letter to Decentius that there was no longer the need for the former rigorism due to the cessation of persecution, and all penitents were to be absolved on Maundy Thursday, though the length of penitence was to be left to the discretion of the priests.²²

Private penance finally appears as such, during the time of Pope Leo I (440-461). In a letter to the Bishops of Campania, Pope Leo directs confessions to be made before the priests instead of before the whole congregation.

It is quite sufficient that the accusation of consciences be made known to the priests alone in secret confession. Let so objectional a custom (as public confession) be put away, lest many be repelled from the remedies of penance, who either are ashamed, or who dread the disclosure to their enemies of deeds of theirs for which they may be brought to ruin under the provision of the laws. For that confession suffices, which is first offered to God and then also to the priest who makes supplication for the sins of the penitents.²³

One of the key words in the above quote from Pope Leo is "secret." Secrecy is the primary element in the atmosphere which must continually surround the confessional, for unless the confession is kept confidential serious consequences can result to the penitent. It is not surprising then that with the rise of auricular confession we can also see the development of the *sigillum* or seal of confession. While secrecy has been implied in the statement of Pope Leo I quoted above, the first formal pronouncement recorded ordering the seal is found in the proceedings of the Council of Dovin

17. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York, 1960), p. 437.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 438.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 439.

20. Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

21. Anne Fremantle, ed., *The Papal Encyclicals* (New York, 1956), p. 63.

22. Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 73.

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

in Armenia, which states that "any priest who betrays the secret of the confessional should be stricken with anathema."²⁴ Strict penalties are also provided in the *Corpus Juris* written around the close of the Eleventh Century which says:

Let a priest take heed that in case of those who confess their sins to him he do not repeat to any one, either relatives or strangers, the sins that have been confessed to him. If he do otherwise let him be degraded, and for all the days of his life, let him be an object of scorn doing penance as a pilgrim.²⁵

Bishop Jonas of Orleans in the Ninth Century enjoins:

Those who confess their sins to the priest in secret confession and who blot them out by the satisfaction of worthy penance are on no account to be betrayed.²⁶

It remained until the time of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 to make the seal of confession canonically obligatory by requiring the priest not to divulge by "word, sign, or any way" what is said to him in confession.²⁷ This carried over into English canon law; Canon 113 of 1603 reads:

If any man confess his secret sins to the minister . . . we do straightly charge and admonish him, that he do not at any time reveal and make known to any person whatsoever any crime or offence so committed to his trust and secrecy (except they be such crimes as by the laws of this realm his own life may be called into question for concealing the same), under pain of irregularity.²⁸

Belton believes that there is no justification for the qualifying clause on the end of the canon, and claims that he thinks it is the typical English loop-hole method of writing laws as he has found after due investigation that there has been no penalty assessed at death for the concealment of any crime in English law.²⁹

Having looked briefly at the development of the seal of confession, we can now return to look at the development of auricular confession.

After Pope Leo's letter to the Bishops of Campania, the next real development of private confession comes surprisingly from Ireland. As public confession had come into disuse, the monasteries of both the East and the West gradually developed a system of private confession and in the West especially, it extended to the laity. The Irish monks developed it to such an extent that they wrote the first extensive penitential books in which the appropriate satisfactions were listed for specific sins.³⁰ This system of private confession spread to the continent largely through the efforts of Columbanus (543-615) who went with twelve other monks to Burgundy, Northern Switzerland and eventually into Northern Italy, where he founded many monasteries.³¹ In this system can be seen the roots of the malpractices of the later middle ages as Irish monks allowed that a penance could be performed by some good work or that occasionally a sum of money paid for the charitable work of the Church would suffice.³² This system of penance caught on more easily in some parts of the continent than others — notably better in France, and worse in Spain as the rigorist movement held on longer in Spain.³³ As late as the year 589 the Rigorist Council of Toledo which

24. Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 81.

26. *Ibid.*

27. Francis G. Belton, *A Manual for Confessors* (London, 1955), p. 90.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

30. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

31. *Ibid.*

32. John Barton, *Penance and Absolution* (New York, 1961), p. 79.

33. *Ibid.*

was held in Spain *condemned* "those who did not do penance according to the prescribed rules (of public confession) but whenever they fall into sin, seek reconciliation from ordinary priests."³⁴

The use of auricular confession became obligatory at least once a year at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 under Pope Innocent III.

Every Christian, who had attained years of discretion, was to make full confession of all sins to his own priest at least once a year, perform the enjoined penance, and communicate at least at Easter. The penalty for neglect was excommunication.³⁵

Leonard Geddes, a Roman Catholic priest, writes that he believes that the use of auricular confession was required at the time of the Fourth Lateran Council because there had been a great mitigation of the penances which the penitent was called upon to perform; severity was to be replaced by regularity in the use of confession.³⁶

A century and a half before the time of Thomas Aquinas there began to arise in the Church the system of "indulgences." An indulgence is "a remission of a portion or all of the temporal penalties for one's sins."³⁷ The bishops of the Church even before this time had reserved for themselves the privilege to cut down on the satisfactions which were required of a penitent when he confessed his sins if an unusual amount of contrition were indicated, such as the contrition shown in doing a great service for the Church! The development of this right of the bishops into a system was practically inevitable, especially after Pope Urban II promised full indulgences to all those Christians who participated in the First Crusade.³⁸

The system of indulgences gradually evolved into a very complex system which was based supposedly on the powers which Christ delegated to Peter (Matthew 16:19) and then by Peter to the bishops and by bishops to priests. The remission which was granted by an indulgence was not the remission from performing a penance on earth, but from punishment for sins in hell. It was believed (as evidenced by the writings of Thomas Aquinas) that Christ and the saints, by their exemplary lives, had built up a treasury of merits in heaven far in excess of the penances which were required of them for their sins committed on earth. The Pope by the authority granted to him by Christ could draw on their merits for absolved penitents. The penitent was absolved from his guilt in the confessional, and the temporal punishment was remitted by the indulgence.³⁹ Indulgences were never intended to remit the guilt of sin; that could only be done in the confessional. It was almost inevitable, however, that the belief should arise in the popular mind of the middle ages that it was the guilt that was forgiven by this system. The Chancellor of Oxford University, Thomas Gascoigne, wrote about the year 1450:

Sinners say nowadays: "I care not how many evils I do in God's sight, for I can easily get plenary remission of all guilt and penalty by an absolution and indulgence granted me by the Pope, whose written grant I have bought for four or six pence, or have won as a stake for a game of tennis (with the pardoner)." These indulgence-mongers . . . give a letter of pardon, sometimes for two pence, sometimes for a draught of wine or beer . . . or even for the hire of a harlot, or for carnal love.⁴⁰

34. Community of San Séverin, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

35. C. P. S. Clarke, *A Short History of the Christian Church* (London, 1959), p. 211.

36. Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

37. Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 249.

38. *Ibid.*

39. Will Durant, *The Reformation, The Story of Civilization*, Volume VI (New York, 1957), pp. 22-23.

40. Quoted in Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

Pastor, a Roman Catholic, in his *History of the Popes* sums up the difficulty with the system of indulgences very well:

Nearly all abuses connected with indulgences rose from this, that the faithful, after frequenting the sacrament of penance as the recognized condition for getting the indulgence, found themselves called on to make an offering of money in proportion to their means. This offering for good works, which should have been only an accessory, was in certain cases made into the chief condition. . . . The need for money, instead of the good of souls, became only too often the end of the indulgence.⁴¹

Small wonder for the Reformation leaders to disparage the use of the sacrament of penance!

It remained for the Council of Trent to establish auricular confession as a permanent fixture in the Church. The Council condemned the belief that confession *ought* to be public, but did not say that it *cannot* be public; it did establish private confession as the norm, however.⁴² It also anathematized in Canon 6 all those who denied the divine institution of the sacrament of penance and its necessity for salvation.⁴³ It also established the confessional box in 1547 and made it obligatory in 1614 so that the priest would not be tempted to sin by an occasional shapely penitent. The council also did away with some of the grosser abuses of the indulgence system — notably the indulgence sellers.⁴⁴

Confession was deeply inbedded in the English Church from earliest times. The Church in England was very "confession-conscious" probably because of the great Celtic influence exerted there; the same influence which had earlier introduced private confession to the continent under St. Columbanus. There is mention of confession in early Anglo-Saxon place names; for instance, the term for parish was "scrift-scir" or "scrift-shire," meaning a confession district. An Anglo-Saxon child was urged to pray not only for his father and mother, but also for his "scrift" or "confessor." "Shrove Tuesday" is also a name that is dated from Anglo-Saxon times.

In the middle of the Eighth Century, the *Dialogus* of Archbishop Egbert of York mentions that since the time of St. Theodore of Canterbury (c. 670) it had been a praiseworthy custom in England that lay and clergy alike "betake themselves to their confessors, not only in Lent, but before Yuletide, that they might cleanse their souls to receive communion on Christmas Day."⁴⁵

One of the earliest ancestors of our present Prayer Book is found in the old Sarum visitation of the sick. The Service consisted of Seven penitential psalms with their antiphon: "remember not," which was recited by the priest on his way to the house of the sick; followed by a "Peace to this House" which was said on entering. The sick chamber was then sprinkled with holy water, and the penitent was urged to prepare for Holy Unction. Sacramental confession was made followed by an emphatic declaratory absolution, and this was followed by an older *prayer* of absolution similar to the one found on the bottom of page 313 of the American Book of Common Prayer, which is from the Maundy Thursday service of the Gelasian Sacramentary. The prayer form of absolution was normally used until the twelfth century, the indicative form begin-

41. Durant, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

42. Geddes, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

43. C. N. Neil and J. M. Willoughby, eds., *The Tutorial Prayer Book* (London, 1959), p. 322.

44. Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 933.

45. Geddes, *op. cit.*, pp. 79-80.

ning to put in an appearance in about the ninth century.⁴⁶ Unction and Holy Communion from the reserved sacrament followed the absolution.

Bishop White dropped the declaratory form of absolution, which is found in the 1549 and 1552 Prayer Books of England, in the American Book of Common Prayer because he felt that it was not found in the "best" ages of the Church, having been in use only since the twelfth century.⁴⁷

In 1536 the first articles of faith of the English reformation were drawn up by King Henry VIII. It upheld the sacrament of penance as necessary for belief and said that justification was attained by contrition and faith joined with charity.⁴⁸ This was superceded by the Bishop's Book which King Henry had written up to test the temper of his people, but to which he never gave official approval. This book was in turn succeeded by the King's Book of 1543 in which King Henry gave a good Catholic treatment of justification.

Archbishop Cranmer (1489-1556), the great compiler of the Book of Common Prayer, writes concerning auricular confession:

Confession of sins which is called auricular and is made privately to the ministers of the Church, is very useful and most advantageous.⁴⁹

Cranmer, while recognizing the worth of auricular confession does not enforce its use in the Prayer Book of 1549. This Prayer Book leaves it to a man's own conscience whether or not he will make a confession, but it also urges those who do not make auricular confessions to be tolerant toward those who do but this rubric placed at the end of the Service of Holy Communion:

(we require) such as shall be satisfied with general confession not to be offended with them that do use . . . auricular and secret confession to the priest, nor those also, which think needful or convenient for the quieting of their own consciences particularly to open their sins to the priest, to be offended with them that are satisfied with their humble confession to God and the general confession to the Church.⁵⁰

There were open party clashes at this time over the issue of whether or not confession was to be public. The Protestant wing came to dominance in the Prayer Book of 1552 and this rubric was left out. This Prayer Book also substituted the Decalogue with responses for the usual *Confiteor* as the latter "method of examination was liable to so many and grievous corruptions."⁵¹ The 1552 Prayer Book kept auricular confession with the following provisions: it was only to be received in cases of spiritual distress, to be entirely voluntary; furthermore, it was *not* ordered to be secret. It was not to be an exhaustive enumeration of sins, but was to be the opening of grief to a minister of God's word (not necessarily a priest).⁵² It is interesting to note here however, that even while the use of confession was at its lowest ebb, the power to retain and remit sins was still granted to the priest at his ordination.

In the Prayer Book of 1661 while the responsibility for "moving a sick man to make a confession" was laid on the minister, the responsibility of desiring absolution was laid on the penitent.

46. Edward L. Parsons and B. H. Jones, *The American Prayer Book* (New York, 1937), p. 257.

47. Massey Shepherd, *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York, 1950), p. 313.

48. Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 1330.

49. Quoted in A. C. A. Hall, *Confession and the Lambeth Conference* (Boston, 1879), p. 23.

50. Quoted in Francis Procter and Walter Frere, *The New History of the Book of Common Prayer* (London, 1958), p. 483.

51. Neil and Willoughby, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 322.

The Canons of 1604 in the Church of England (which are still in effect today) were adopted at that time to consolidate the medieval canons of worth, and to put up a united front against the Puritans, who among other things wished to delete the word "absolution" from the Prayer Book. The Canon dealing with the seal of the confessional has already been discussed earlier in this chapter.

From 1662 onward the use of auricular confession fell into misuse until the time of the Oxford Movement. The fact that there was such surprise engendered by the members of the Oxford Movement in claiming the power of the keys for Anglican priests shows that the use of absolution had been greatly neglected. The practice of hearing private confession in the contemporary Anglican Church really dates from Edward Pusey's tract which he wrote for the Oxford Group in 1846 entitled: *The Entire Absolution of the Penitent*. In this tract he claims the power of the keys of the kingdom for Anglican priests. This tract was written in answer to Bishop Tait's description of auricular confession as being "the source of unspeakable abominations, which has been in use in some of the town churches."⁵³ In 1845 Edward Pusey built St. Saviour's Church at his own expense, and it was staffed by a group of clergy who lived along almost monastic lines. They instituted daily masses and encouraged auricular confession, which had been regarded as a purely Roman practice up until that time. The Bishop of Ripon called the church: "a plague spot in my diocese!"⁵⁴ There is a rather humorous account in Geoffrey Faber's book: *Oxford Apostles*, which describes Dr. Pusey's hearing of auricular confessions:

to confess to Pusey became something very like a fashion. For the most part his penitents were women . . . but a few men came as well. "I once and once only," admitted a Mr. Mark Pattison, "got so low by fostering a morbid state of conscience as to go to confession to Dr. Pusey. Years afterwards it came to my knowledge that Pusey had told a fact about myself, which he got from me on that occasion, to a friend of his who employed it to annoy me."⁵⁵

It was also said that Dr. Pusey, because of his incessant hearing of confessions, began to take a morbid interest in everyone's spiritual health, pumping them full of questions about the "state of their souls, their inmost wishes, habits, intentions."⁵⁶ Clearly it took the Church of England a time to get back into the knack of hearing confessions privately; it was done at first with many hard feelings and much misunderstanding. In 1858 a priest, Alfred Poole of St. Barnabas, Pimlico, England, was deprived of his curacy by Bishop Tait for refusing to give up the practice of hearing confessions.⁵⁷

Gradually more understanding came about as the defenders of auricular confession based their claims on sound historical and Biblical scholarship. Its use was eventually recognized to be beneficial and handbooks came to be printed to educate priests on the theology and mechanics of how to hear confessions. The first of these handbooks came out in 1877 by private publication and was called the *Priest in Absolution*. The practice eventually came to America in the great liturgical awakening, but has unfortunately remained for the most part only in the Anglo-Catholic wing of our Church. It is gradually being disassociated with churchmanship issues, fortunately.

53. I. R. H. Moorman, *A History of the Church in England* (New York, 1959), p. 365.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

55. Geoffrey Faber, *Oxford Apostles* (London, 1954), p. 378.

56. *Ibid.*

57. Moorman, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

Stephen Neill sums up the position of confession in the Anglican Church quite well:

The Anglican tradition throws great responsibility onto the individual for the working out of his own salvation. It is his will that must be sanctified. His choices must be his own choices. But the individual must not be left alone in his isolation; he must not imagine that there is no one to help him, if he should fail. The Church is there. . . . The ordained minister is to stand by, strengthen the weak, guide the perplexed, absolve the penitent. The Anglican Churches have never made confession to God in the presence of a priest obligatory, though they encourage those who are troubled to open their grief to a discreet and learned minister of God's Word . . . and provide a formula of absolution which the priest may pronounce to the comfort of the penitent sinner.⁵⁸

Let us examine in greater detail this "formula of absolution" and the form and matter surrounding it.

58. Stephen Neill, *Anglicanism* (London, 1958), pp. 424-425.

CHAPTER 3 STRUCTURE OF AURICULAR CONFESSION

“ALL those who cannot quiet their consciences, and those sick persons who are troubled with any weighty matter, should have private recourse to the help and counsel of a ‘learned and discreet minister of God’s word. . . .’”¹ So reads the rationale for the use of confession in *Doctrine in the Church of England*, which paraphrases the rubrics from the “Order of the Visitation of the Sick.” In our own Prayer Book, the rubric reads:

Then shall the sick person be moved to make a special confession of his sins, if he feels his conscience troubled with any matter; after which confession on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God’s mercy and forgiveness.²

Thus both the right and the duty of making a private or auricular confession to a priest is conveyed to the Anglican in that central manifestation of Anglican thought and worship — the Book of Common Prayer. As the place of auricular confession in the history of the Church has been discussed in the last chapter, we shall now turn to a discussion of the characteristics of confession: what its purposes are, the rationale behind it, what its substance and form are and finally a word about the authority of the priest, whose duty it is to pronounce absolution in God’s name.

Confession primarily rests upon the principle that fellowship with God can only come through man’s severance from sin, for it is sin which separates man from a realization of God’s love.³ It is by means of confession that man takes steps to remove the sin which stands between himself and God by his own fault. Confession also rests upon the premise that it was Christ’s death on Calvary which made propitiation for man’s sin “once and for all,” and that man’s connection with this event rests in his baptism. However, the problem of post-baptismal sin constitutes the need for confession and absolution in order to reconnect man with the effectual working of God’s grace after baptism has already taken place. Primarily, auricular confession is privately confessing before the whole Church, represented in the person of the priest, and then being reunited by grace with that Body of Christ from which the Christian has separated himself through his own pride and intention, through absolution. The necessity for the sacrament of penance came with the advent of infant baptism in the early Church when all sin became in effect post-baptismal.⁴ The moving away from God’s love by disregard, neglect, and intention is sin, and the moving back toward God’s love is contrition which is the essence of the sacrament of penance.⁵

1. William Temple, ed., *Doctrine in the Church of England* (London, 1957), p. 192.
2. *The Book of Common Prayer* (USA) “Rubric: Order for the Visitation of the Sick,” p. 313.
3. Temple, p. 189.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
5. Community of San Séverin: *Confession, Meaning and Practice* (Chicago, 1959), p. 46.

We shall now turn to a discussion of the form and matter of confession. "In penance, as in matrimony, the matter of the sacrament is provided by the recipient, while the form is the express statement (a judicial statement) conferred upon the recipient."⁶ The matter is provided by the penitent himself, and this consists of contrition, confession, and satisfaction. This comprises what is basically necessary for the penitent to receive the benefit of penance and to become reunited with God.

Confession begins with "contrition" because in order to be forgiven for one's sins one must feel truly sorry that he has committed them. It would do no good to forgive one who is not repentent. The term "contrition" comes from the Latin word "contristo," meaning "with tears or with sorrow." Catholic theology holds that "the truly contrite person is always a forgiven person."⁷ The penitent achieves this feeling of sorrow for his sins, not only by recounting them in his period of self-examination before his confession, but by the act of confession itself, also a form of feeling sorrow, for it is indeed a humiliating experience to have to confess one's faults in the presence of another, especially to a representative of the Church. One comes to feel sorry for his sins once he sees God's love and the relationship of his past deeds of sin in the light of that love; however, the penitent must express this sense of guilt and repentance outwardly to the priest before he is allowed to receive formal absolution.

Following contrition, the next prerequisite is the act of confession itself. In order to receive the benefits of absolution, one must accuse himself outwardly to the priest of the sins he has committed, and this confession must be complete insofar as the penitent is able to judge. "It must mention all the forms and instances of mortal sin committed."⁸ One must confess also the inward as well as the outward manifestations of his sin — both the desire and the action. Also the circumstances of the sin must be included in the confession: "the person sinning, the person sinned against, the place, time, and the end in view."⁹

The final element in the matter of confession is that of satisfaction, an integral part, rather than an essential part of the sacrament. One is essentially forgiven whether or not he performs the satisfaction, but it is a part of the confessional procedure. In essence the penitent cannot satisfy the great wrong that he has done against God, that would be impossible, so satisfaction must always remain a token return for God's grace in forgiveness. One shows, however, both his gratitude and his penitence by trying to make amends for the evil that he has done, even if it must be only a token amendment. The satisfaction which the priest instructs the penitent to perform, however, must be of such a nature that it will not force him to make his sin public, as this would be tantamount to a virtual breaking of the seal of the confessional which is to be avoided at all costs. The satisfaction which the penitent performs deals with temporal element only. As an example of this biblically, King David was forgiven for his sexual sin with Bathsheba by Nathan the prophet, but his child died. The absolution pronounced by the priest guaranteeing the forgiveness of God does not guarantee the remission of subsequent results of the sin but serves only as a token of one's intention to make things right. In this way the absolution given by the priest in the name of God does not limit either divine or human freedom.¹⁰ The "penances" which a priest

6. Watkin W. Williams, *The Moral Theology of the Sacrament of Penance* (London, 1917), p. 11.

7. Kenneth Mackenzie, *The Priest and Penance* (London, 1944), p. 14.

8. Williams, p. 32.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

10. Francis G. Belton, *A Manual for Confessors* (London, 1955), pp. 70-71.

gives to the penitent to perform after the absolution has been given (which are usually very slight in form in comparison with the magnitude of the sin committed) are called "satisfactions" because of their relation to Christ's satisfaction rather than in terms of their availing anything of themselves, apart from his death."¹¹ This raises the question, however, of the effect of satisfaction in the popular mind. After years of making symbolic "satisfactions" there would seem to be the danger of the concept arising in the popular mind that these "satisfactions" might be essential to the sacrament itself, and people would get the impression that they are necessary for the sacrament to be valid. This would seem to foster pelagianism then, in that people would get the impression that in order to get to heaven, these satisfactions or penances would have to be performed in order to receive God's forgiveness. So, in effect, they would get the idea that they are earning their way into heaven. It would be well then to see that people who use auricular confession are instructed not only in the mechanics of the sacrament, but also in the theology behind it.

After discussing the "proximate matter" of confession, we now turn to a discussion of the "remote matter" of the sacrament or sin. The qualification of the sins which are dealt with in confession is that they must be mortal sins and that the confession must include all mortal sins committed since baptism. "Remote matter" falls into the two categories of being either "necessary" or "free."¹² "Necessary matter" for confession is mortal sin which must be confessed. "Free matter" is venial sin, the type of sin which may or may not be confessed according to the desires of the penitent. "Matter" on the borderline may be "certain" or "doubtful" in terms of whether it is mortal or venial in nature.

"Mortal sin" is defined as "disobedience to God in a serious matter with full knowledge and consent,"¹³ and it must have these three qualifications: 1) "there must be full aversion of the will, 2) free consent of the will, and 3) the matter or object must be serious."¹⁴ These mortal sins are "necessary matter" for confession because they deprive the soul of the "sanctifying grace and the friendship of God."¹⁵ The term "mortal sin" originally came from I John 5:16, which mentions that there are sins which are "unto death." This has been taken to mean that these are the sins which would have the power to condemn one to hell — as for instance any sin of intentional pride. The primary sin unto death, the sin against the Holy Ghost, is not mentioned by name in the Scriptures but is considered to be a flat denial of what one knows to be true of God.

Venial sin, "free matter," is a sin "not unto death" and may be confessed voluntarily if the penitent wishes to do so. These are the small sins which merely put one temporarily out of harmony with man and nature but are not of serious proportions. Daily performance of good works is believed to eradicate the effects of this type of sin.

There also arises the question of certain and doubtful matter for confession. "Certain matter" is a sin for which valid absolution can be given; "doubtful matter" is that sin for which the priest is not sure whether absolution can be given or not. One would be doubtful for instance when the sin has not been confessed sufficiently

11. Francis J. Hall, *Theological Outlines* (New York, 1933), p. 271.

12. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

13. Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

14. Belton, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

15. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

to give the absolver enough evidence upon which to grant absolution. In order for it to be "sufficient," the penitent must accuse himself of the sin "in detail and in specie, and it is necessary that he enumerate his sins in each instance."¹⁶ Insufficient matter may be absolved only in extreme cases where there is danger of the penitent dying or there is not sufficient time or circumstance to hear the confession in detail.

The "form" of the sacrament is the nature of the words used by the priest in pronouncing absolution. In the Church from the twelfth century on the words are essentially "indicative" rather than "depractory" in form, as the priest has been ordained to make pronouncement as judge in the matter;¹⁷ however, the American Prayer Book uses the latter form in every instance where absolution is to be pronounced as opposed to the English Prayer Book's form of absolution in the Service for the Visitation of the Sick.

This brings up the final subject to be discussed in this chapter concerning the authority of the absolver. In the "Ordering of Priests" in the Book of Common Prayer, the priest at his ordination is given the following authority at the laying on of hands by the bishop:

Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain, they are retained. And be thou a faithful Dispenser of the Word of God, and of his holy Sacraments; In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

According to Massey Shepherd, this form has been used from the time of the early Church and derives its basis from Scripture. The priest technically is to act as a deputy of the bishop who in turn derives his authority by Apostolic Succession from other bishops which go back to the Apostles. The scriptural authority for Christ's giving the power to forgive sins to the Apostles is recorded in the Gospel of John 20:22-23:

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained. (R.S.V.)

It is a matter of faith on our part that our Anglican bishops continue in this line of authority from the Apostles.

16. Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

CHAPTER 4 THEOLOGY OF FORGIVENESS

THE alienated state in which man finds himself has been admirably described by H. R. Mackintosh:

To be alienated from God, for whose service and obedience we were made is the invariable antecedent of alienation from self and neighbor, and the breaking of that unseen tie, if unrepaired by forgiveness, will bring every candid man to the avowal that he is dragging with him through life a weight of unmanageable and perverse evil which in some sense he must own as his and cannot disown.¹

This burden of guilt which modern man likes to think is the unique problem of his own day with the worries which the nuclear age has put upon him is not new but is as old as mankind and is a result of sin. Sin is based upon two postulates; namely, "that the soul is free to choose between good and bad and right and wrong in all its actions" — this is known as free will. The second postulate is that "the soul, however tainted or corrupted by sin, retains an innate power of both perceiving what is good and right and aspiring to it" — this is known as conscience.² Because man has been given free will and has the knowledge of the way he should choose — namely, God's way — when he does not choose to follow God's way he puts a barrier between himself and God. As God is totally just he cannot tolerate this sin even though he continues to love the individual who sins despite his action. God is bound by his very nature of essential goodness to be antagonistic to sin whenever and wherever it exists. This antagonism towards sin is called the "wrath of God."³ The wrath of God has been termed by some as being the reverse side of the coin of love, for it is in fighting sin with His stern justice, hard and exacting though it be, that God is showing love to man in destroying that which seeks ultimately to destroy man.⁴

1. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London, 1961), p. 53.
2. K. E. Kirk, *Some Principles of Moral Theology* (London, 1961), p. 9.
3. William Temple, ed., *Doctrine in the Church of England* (London, 1957), p. 55.
4. *Ibid.*

Sin can be described from the human point of view as being essentially a selfish failure on the part of man to trust and obey God. It can be measured in its unlikeliness to the spirit of Jesus Christ, who being God, nevertheless had the limitations of man and made the perfect obedient response to God's love when He dwelt among us here on earth.⁵ Even though man may try to make the perfect response that Christ did, he is bound to fail if he relies upon his own resources, for only God can supply the means necessary for one to lead a justified life through his grace. Part of man's failure is caused by his error; he simply does not see the results of his sinful actions which spread and multiply like ripples from a pebble cast into a quiet pond. It is impossible for one to see the repercussions of any one sinful act which he commits and many times to see clearly what is the most loving and obedient response he can make in any particular situation, which is God's will. The great prayer of Christ from the cross was: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Christ prayed not only for God to grant forgiveness for the sinful action of those who crucified Him but also for the ignorance which they exhibited for not being able to see the gravity of what they were doing.⁶ One cannot write off all of sin to error, however, for that would preclude any idea of moral responsibility. Man must always remain responsible, for he has some knowledge of the results of his choice, even though he must remain in the dark as to the full extent of the evil which that choice brings into being.

When man makes selfish choices, choosing to do his own will instead of that of God, he feels the burden of this choice as guilt and shame. Guilt can be described as the feeling of responsibility for the sin which he has committed, while shame is the sense of being defiled for making the choices that he did in contributing to his alienation from God.⁷ Shame can be more aptly described as being a sense of self-loathing which results from one's feeling that he has "let God down" in not making the proper response to His love. This guilt and shame which we feel is also a sign of hope, for it shows that we are not wholly cut off from a recognition of God — willingness to accuse ourselves is a sign that He has not wholly forsaken us.⁸ This guilt has two aspects: it bears upon ourselves and our sense of unworthiness, and it bears upon our relationship with God — for we come to loathe Him who by His very goodness reminds us of our own sense of failure and inadequacy. Even though we know of our responsibility in our sense of failure, we are tempted to rationalize our guilt by resorting to the popular myth that "to know all is to have pardoned all."⁹ We feel that if we just knew the facts, we would not feel a sense of guilt. It is surprising the number of people who actually believe that if they can just explain their sinful actions in terms of their psychological causes — sometimes found way back in their childhood days, that one is automatically forgiven of any responsibility for them. Improper toilet training in childhood has in many instances become the favorite scapegoat of the twentieth century. However, no matter how hard modern man tries to find a "reason" for his sense of guilt and uneasiness with life, there still remains what has been described as his loneliness within the world.¹⁰ He feels a sense of guilt, does not acknowledge his responsibility for it, and casts about for a reason for it in the hopes that he might be able to explain it away. It cannot be explained away for diagnosis does not mean cure.

5. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

7. Temple, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

8. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

9. *Ibid.*

10. W. J. Wolf, *No Cross, No Crown* (Hamden, Connecticut, 1962), p. 11.

Salvation (or security)¹¹ is sought from this uneasy and burdensome existence. Salvation does not come by ideas, however, but by the *fact* of Jesus Christ who alone can bring us back into the fellowship with God and ourselves.¹² Christ brings us back into fellowship with God because he alone made the perfect righteous response to God. God, because of His perfect righteousness, must punish all unrighteousness and it is only in our identification by faith with Christ (the perfect righteous one) that we can have righteousness and be saved. Man, looking for an answer only in himself, is not able to help himself; he must turn (repent) to God for an answer to his chaotic state. We shall now turn for a closer look at the process by which one repents and turns from his sinful ways, followed by a discussion of the atonement of Christ. This will be followed by a discussion of the nature of the forgiveness by which man is enabled to become reunited with God. The chapter will conclude with a brief glance at the "fruits" of this penitence.

The more we try to live a moral life, the more we fail and fall into despair. We realize that we cannot live according to the way that we were intended to live if left to our own strengths. When we come to the end of our power and turn to God for help (which is repentance), we must acknowledge our own moral unworthiness. This is the prerequisite of repentance.¹³ All religion has been termed as ultimately "fox-hole" religion; we never really turn to God until we have to and that is *in extremis*. We are *in extremis* when we see ourselves as we really are. When we look at ourselves, what we see is primarily self-love which is mixed with the seeds of possibilities for something better. Our self-love can be seen as trying to take over more and more of our lives. In the presence of our friends, we can usually control ourselves by self-discipline, but when we are by ourselves before God, we see that "control over our involuntary spirits of feeling is unavailing."¹⁴ True repentance begins when the individual sees that the impediment of his union with God and his true nature lies in himself in the form of this self-love.¹⁵ The act of repentance which this realization evokes takes the form of the individual confessing his sin, attempting to make reparation for it, and expressing a purpose for the amendment of his life — accepting forgiveness and relying on God's grace to help him to stay in fellowship with God.

There are impediments though, which stand in the way between an individual and his repentance, which are present in our modern society. They fall into three main categories:

The first obstacle to repentance is the wide-spread belief that there exists a class of Christians who can be termed the "once born."¹⁶ These are people whose spiritual growth has been so regular and so good that sin is something which they do not experience, and therefore, repentance is unnecessary.

Kirk feels that this is a product of Christians who have grown up after the downfall of hell-fire preaching. He feels that the contemporary Christian is not familiar with what it really means to be separated from God in hell, and is therefore not capable of seeing his own separation from God. This is a product of the modern preacher's emphasis on the dignity, rather than the depravity, of man.¹⁷

11. Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

12. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 199.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 200.

15. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 61.

The second obstacle to repentance is that for many Christians emotion of any kind is a foreign thing. These are called the "healthy-minded." It is possible for these Christians to turn from sin, but it is not possible for them to feel sorry for it; however, sorrow for one's sins is a necessary element in repentance.

This second type of individual exists because of a decline in the sense of what sin is. The Church does not emphasize its importance because it is thought to be much too morbid a subject for the pulpit.¹⁸ For one who recognizes what sin really is, he will react to it with his entire being, which includes his feelings. It is interesting to note that modern psychology deals with one's feelings as being the key to one's self-fulfillment; the Church cannot afford to overlook this truth.

The third obstacle is that there are some Christians who are too emotional and therefore their feeling sorry for their sins may not be an indication of their feelings about sin, because they are morbidly sorry about most everything anyway. They may even derive a certain sense of enjoyment from feeling sorry for their sins; some will even go so far as to sin so that they can taste the fruits of repentance. For them repentance becomes sentimental if not neurotic.

This third type of "sentimental" Christian follows a course which is one of pride. Morbid despair follows upon such a sentimental course. It is based upon a false sense of humility which is really superfluous to the degree of sin committed. One can be quick to note that these very people who are proud of their acknowledgment of a sinful nature would be the first to take offense if "another took them at the word and urged amendment of life."¹⁹

The true attitude which must underly one's repentance is an "organization of the whole emotional element in religion — the purification of feeling so that nothing but what is good is desired, and nothing but what is evil is abhorred."²⁰ While feeling may not be the most important aspect of the spiritual life or even of repentance (love and service of God and our neighbor are), yet it should be present in the sorrow which we feel for our sins and in our desire for grace and forgiveness.²¹ St. Paul differentiates between the two types of sorrow: the sorrow of the world which leads to death, and sorrow for sins which leads to repentance.

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a Godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.

(II Corinthians 7:9, 10 R.S.V.)

What is needed for true repentance is recognition of sin, sorrow for it, and abandonment of it. These three elements must act together, for recognition of sin in and by itself may be a form of defiance, sorrow for sin alone may be despair, and abandonment alone may be prudence. The regenerating element of repentance lies in all three baptized in a sense of God's personal grace.²²

The importance of repentance is evidenced by the fact that Jesus spoke more of repentance than he did of faith. It was a necessary element in one's approach to God,

18. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

22. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

no matter how small the cause. In the story of the Prodigal Son, repentance took place because of hunger. This does not matter, for in the end not the *cause* but the *fact* of repentance was the important thing.

Thomas Aquinas differentiates between the motives for turning from sin: contrition and attrition. Contrition arises from filial fear — or “fear of incurring the guilt of offending the father”; attrition is servile fear — “the fear of evil consequences to oneself either in this world or the next.”²³ Either may be used by God in order to turn a sinner to Himself, though the former motive is preferred.

In the end repentance unto life is as lonely as dying — for ultimately when one faces God for his sins, he must face Him alone. While the sinner may be led towards God by Christian friends, the actual turning must be an individual experience as solitary as the choice of the sin which first alienated him.²⁴

We now turn our attention to a less subjective study — the atonement. God’s pardon of us cannot be understood apart from a recognition of His character. As He is holy, sin is something which He must condemn and even punish, though the worst punishment of all is alienation from Him. Despite God’s hatred of sin, He loves us as His creatures. The most dramatic illustration of this is the coming to earth of Christ and his dying on the cross for us. The crucifixion reveals God’s love for us, while at the same time it also reveals God’s unrelenting attitude toward sin — the type of attitude which did not spare his own Son from death on the cross.

The atonement is bound up in two words: “propitiation” and “expiation.” Propitiation refers to the belief that in some manner the wrath of God, which is offended by sin, can be turned away so that He can again be reconciled to man. Expiation refers more to the sins committed than to God in that the sin itself is “covered over” by some means so that it is no longer an offense to the righteousness of God.

The cross of Christ represents a union between these two elements for

Christ by the submission of His sinless life to the consequences of sin, created the conditions in which God can and does take the penitent sinner into full fellowship of His Kingdom and treat Him as His child. (It also) acts with cleansing power upon a sin-stained world, and so enables us to be cleansed.²⁵

In the Old Testament when one felt estranged from God, he felt that the only thing that would express his remorse would be the death of an animate victim. This sacrifice represented not only the desire to be right with God, but it also served to acknowledge one’s sin. In the Old Testament this means of propitiation was given by God Himself to show His essential good will toward the sinner. This is paralleled in the New Testament in that the redemption of Christ is also carried through by divine initiative.²⁶ This was carried out through the obedience and death of Jesus Christ.

It would not be to the interests of this paper to discuss in detail the various theories of the atonement except in the most general manner. Suffice it to say that sin against God has been explained in terms of disobedience to law, definite criminal acts, corruption, alienation, and bondage. Atonement for these acts has been described in

23. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

24. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

25. Temple, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

terms of satisfaction of God's justice (Anselm), expiation of crime (Calvin), cleansing or purification, reconciliation, victory over the devil (Aulén), and deliverance from evil powers such as sin, law, and death (Luther).²⁷ In our contemporary society the satisfaction theories have not been as well accepted due to a loss of the popular awareness of sin, while the moral influence theories (such as Campbell, Bushnell, and James Denney) have been more readily accepted because of our existential approach to life.²⁸

The basis of the New Testament concept of atonement can be summed up in one word — "love."

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16, 17 R.S.V.)

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the focal point of this love of God. In Christ the old legalistic relationship between God and his people disappear — caught up in a dynamic relationship of his active and revealed love. There is no longer the belief that there is a direct relationship between the obedience of man and the favor of God; it is taken out of this cause and effect relationship to be put into terms of an experience of love and grace. God met man in his enmity and separation with his love and brought him into relationship as a son. He did this through grace. In Tillich's words:

Grace is the impact of the Spiritual Presence that makes fulfillment of the law possible — though fragmentarily. It is the reality of that which the law demands, the reunion with one's true being, and this means the reunion with oneself, with others, and with the ground of one's self and others. . . . Only love . . . can motivate by giving what it demands.²⁹

The legalistic relationship between God and man is not sufficient because it is essentially self-centered. When man's concern becomes centered upon his justifying himself to God by his own merits, it begins to take on the essence of sin, for its results in one's failure to face his own sinful nature and a failure to rely upon God's grace for his justification. There is no room for a legalistic relationship between God and man when God himself takes the initiative to come to man in his enmity and separation — the legalistic is assimilated by the loving.³⁰

G. W. Lampe holds the theory that our theories of the atonement all were developed to answer the problem of post-baptismal sin. As God's grace had originally been shown once to an individual in his baptism and could not be repeated, it was felt that to fall from this state was nearly unforgiveable, and any man who fell had to demonstrate his sorrow for his sins by the performance of many rigorous works. This gradually evolved into the popular belief of a merit and reward system so that by the time of the Thirty-nine Articles in the Church of England the propitiatory element was dominant.

Christ truly suffered, was crucified, dead and buried, *to reconcile his father to us, and to be a sacrifice*, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men. (Article II)

Where is the love of God expressed here? It seems to be that God's action is all expressed in legalistic terms and there is no mention of the overpowering love of God

27. Joseph Haroutunian, "Atonement," Marvin Halverson and Arthur Cohen, eds., *A Handbook of Christian Theology* (London, 1960), p. 24.

28. *Ibid.*

29. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume III* (Chicago, 1963), p. 274.

30. G. W. H. Lampe, "The Atonement: Law and Love," A. R. Vidler, ed., *Soundings* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 178.

which prompted Him to become Incarnate and to seek out man in his sinful state. This view is primarily seen when God is enthroned as divine justice, rather than divine love.³¹

Lampe sums up the problem of atonement theories in his state that they subordinate love to justice and so resolve the principle of the Gospel into that of law, on the supposition that God's action takes place within a framework of law and that what Christ does is to meet the demands of the law — instead of extracting it from sinners. This brings back into the Gospel of reconciliation the subtle form of merit and reward.³²

Several of the parables which Jesus told serve as an example that ultimately God will not be made into the image of man, which man in his vengeance tries to do with his many theories of atonement. In the story of the Prodigal Son, Christ tells us of the Father who accepted his son back *without condition*. The son was not required to do anything in order to win his father's forgiveness — the Father's love was all that was necessary. Also in the story of Zacchaeus it can be noted that he made restitution to those whom he had cheated *after* Jesus had already accepted him and gone to him in his sinful state. Sin is taken away by the acceptance of the sinner into sonship without qualification.³³ All this is not to imply that most of the various theories of atonement do not *state* that it is God's action in coming to us that brings about our reconciliation, but they *imply* that the primary action is the effect of Jesus' self-sacrifice on God's righteousness. Would not the truth be that to make propitiation to one who deeply loves us already is ultimately unnecessary?

Let us look more closely then into the nature of forgiveness — for it is through the process of forgiveness that God reconciles us to Himself.

Forgiveness can be defined as God's love drawing the sinner, despite his sin, into communion with Himself, and His taking the first step in doing this amazing thing.³⁴ God's forgiveness comes about not because of the sacrifices which he has received from us but because He is Holy. Because His forgiveness is not conditional then, it is absolute and becomes a gift with which the sinner may do with what he wants. He is free to accept or reject this gift of God's love, and so absolute is man's freedom that God will not interfere in the results which would come to a man were he to choose to reject what God has given him. The fact that God's forgiveness is absolute overthrows the theory that there are any unforgiveable sins, such as that mentioned in I John 5:16. For to acknowledge that there is a sin which God could not forgive, even though one might eventually repent his doing it, would be to seriously deny God's freedom to forgive all who repent and invoke His absolute love.

A popular misconception concerning God's forgiveness is that it is His love which forgives and His righteousness that condemns sin.³⁵ There are many who feel that God is compartmentalized into these realms of action by His character and that His love is somehow to be invoked against His righteousness in a sort of divine schizophrenia. This is incorrect in that God's nature cannot be so divided; it is His love which reacts violently against sin and moral evil. Because God's love is absolute it cannot tolerate that which seeks to overthrow its existence. Divine love will then

31. Lampe, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 184.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

34. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

manifest itself to those who are in sin as divine wrath sometimes, even though it remains in essence divine love. Much of this misconception is due to our sentimentalized point of view of love, which sees it only in terms of being consistent with the desires of the one being loved. It also presupposes that our knowledge of what is good equals that of God. The love of God which reacts against sin so strongly takes whatever method is necessary for the overthrow of evil and so it does not always appear as love; the crucifixion is the strongest testimony of this.

Another misconception of forgiveness is that many people identify it with the remission of the results which are attached to the sin once it has been committed. To say that the forgiveness of sin automatically erases all the results of sin which has been committed is to deny the reality and power of sin. What makes sin so powerful is that it does have its indelible qualities which cannot be removed once the sin has been committed. Forgiveness cannot erase the loss of reputation which an alcoholic incurs or correct the damage which is done as a result of hate. It is interesting to note that conversely governments and judges can remit penalties for murder (by suspending sentences), but that only the injured party can forgive. Likewise a father can pardon a child but decide that the punishment must be carried out in the child's best interests. Pardon and remission of penalty are not the same thing.³⁶

What forgiveness does mean is that even though the irreparable damage caused by our sin must remain, nevertheless, the "old affections and confidences must be allowed to overflow and try to inundate the cleft caused by the old sin."³⁷

The assurance or feeling that we are forgiven has to come through our own subjective experience. This assurance of forgiveness becomes a very powerful force in the lives of those who have received it. H. A. Williams expresses this quite vividly:

When I act compulsively . . . with a friend, nothing restores me to goodness and love so effectively as his refusal to believe that the me who lost my temper is anything but a superficial and unimportant aspect of my full self. Forgiveness is rooted in this conviction.³⁸

Assurance of forgiveness must rest then in present and real situations of being forgiven, rather than in any hazy remembrance of forgiveness for sins committed long ago. Its reality for the sinner depends upon its presence. Through this experience of being forgiven one then finds the ability to forgive others; the ability to receive forgiveness rests upon the ability to grant forgiveness. In one respect forgiveness is a talent which can be developed or allowed to atrophy. In this experience of forgiveness one comes into a trust communion with God as his father and with men as his brothers. "Pardon is not the end of God's ways with men but it is the blessing which leads all others by the hand."³⁹ In the end the Church makes forgiveness credible, not by its testimony to the fact that God forgives, but by the forgiveness which its members constantly show to each other. There is a juxtaposition of divine and human forgiveness; they must work together as God acts through human agents. It is only by Christians forgiving non-Christians that this can effectively be shown forth in the world.⁴⁰

In conclusion, a word may be said here about the "fruits" of forgiveness. While

36. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

38. H. A. Williams, "Theology and Self Awareness," A. R. Vidler, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

39. Mackintosh, p. 29.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 237.

it is impossible to chart exactly the way in which a forgiven Christian will respond, nevertheless there are certain manifestations of a forgiving spirit which show themselves when forgiveness is practiced. It has its corporate and its personal aspects. Corporately it is manifested in that there is no false shame which exists between a Christian and a sinner or between a sinner and the Church.⁴¹ It is certain that those who have been truly forgiven and have been brought into communion with God would not want to deny others the privilege of undergoing the same experience. When many of these forgiven individuals are gathered together in the Church, there should appear an accepting spirit which manifests itself to all who come into their presence. This accepting spirit acknowledges that it is ultimately God who judges and God who forgives and that we are all in the same boat as receivers of His mercy and forgiveness.

The personal fruits of being forgiven can be seen in an increase in the individual's sense of humility,

shown both in his willingness to accept reproof and advice, and a decline in the tendency to find excuses for sin, as also a constant hopefulness for God's pardon and assistance to ultimate victory.⁴²

One who has undergone forgiveness is humble because if he experiences a true sense of forgiveness, he would know that it came about not by his own achievement, but by the grace and free gift of God and of his brother. Mackintosh points out the two primary manifestations of the forgiven person is that there is in evidence the "tendency to take humbly from God, which is faith; and the tendency to judge and amend oneself, which is penitence."⁴³

The place of forgiveness in the Christian faith is central because it actively demonstrates the primary reason why God became Incarnate: to show to the world His love by His forgiving action. Forgiveness is a dynamic thing which grows by one's experience of it, and stultifies by one's trying to explain the principles of how it works. One cannot really explain forgiveness by theories any more than he can explain his love for another — for it would "die the death of a thousand qualifications." Love is not a very reasonable thing, neither is forgiveness which is a work of love. For the forgiven person the question of *how* his forgiveness came about and the dangers of what would happen to our society morally if everyone knew that they could be forgiven whenever they were penitent — are irrelevant questions. All the forgiven person knows is that he has experienced love in fact and in gratitude wishes to express it to others. God's atoning act toward the world is therefore to be carried out by the Body of Christ which is the Church. It is in accepting forgiveness and in forgiving others that we are fulfilling the commission which Christ gave to His disciples at the Ascension, when He said:

Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations . . . you are *witnesses* of these things.

(Luke 24:46 - 48)

The way in which Christ's Gospel of forgiveness is to be preached is to practice it. There is no getting around that. This Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation can be summed up in one phrase which transcends all reason —

that ultimately to long for Peace with the Father is to have it.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Temple, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

⁴² Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁴³ Mackintosh, *op. cit.* p. 202.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSIONS — POSSIBLE PLACE OF AURICULAR CONFESSION TODAY

THE use of auricular confession has fallen into disuse in the present day outside of those churches where its regular use has been required by canon law. The reasons for this are varied. In the first place, auricular confession is a very painful and humiliating experience to undergo, as it should be. To confess one's sins to God in the presence of a fellow-Christian demands that the penitent give up all semblance of pride, acknowledge that he has failed his God, his neighbor, and himself in that he has not been able to live the type of life which God would have him live. It is a painful experience because in confession there is no provision for the penitent to place the blame on anyone else but himself for his failure, but is forced to acknowledge that he has sinned "by his own fault — by his own most grievous fault." The results of undergoing this painful experience of auricular confession are indescribably good, however. Those who have undergone auricular confession for the first time describe their subsequent feelings as that of euphoria, "because for the first time in my life, I have felt really forgiven and at peace with God."¹ Just as no one really really knows what it means to be in love until the experience has been personalized for him, so no one understands what forgiveness is like until he himself has been forgiven personally for sins for which he himself is responsible. Because the Church offers an "easier way out" in the matter of making confessions, many Christians of our branch of the Catholic Faith, following the path of least resistance, depend upon general confessions for their assurance that they have found forgiveness of God for their sins. While it is theologically acceptable to make corporate confessions, the assurance of forgiveness must remain of a corporate nature, and one's experience becomes that of finding God's forgiveness *everywhere*, while his need continues to cry out that he find God's forgiveness *somewhere*. If one does not find a sense of forgiveness in the Church, then he becomes disillusioned with the Church's ability to ease his burden of guilt and so he looks elsewhere for it. All the while the Church is not meeting the need of lifting this sense of guilt from these people, it is increasing it in its preaching of original sin and attempting to point out how the ordinary Christian is falling short of the mark in his daily living because of his pride. This but increases the sense of guilt on the Christian to the extent that many times he comes to believe that the Church "scolds a man for not being a replica of Christ, and then scolds him if he believes that he could be."²

1. Personal interview; name withheld upon request.

2. David E. Roberts, *Psychotherapy and a Christian View of Man* (New York, 1950), p. 123.

The failure of the Church in not conveying God's forgiveness does not rest solely upon those denominations which do not require auricular confession. There is an equal danger on the other side that when churches require auricular confession on a regular basis regardless of the need or the desire for it that it tends to become a meaningless rite devoid of any real sense of significance. The effect of this latter approach is hard to determine, but one thing can be said in its favor: it at least puts the "temptation" for forgiveness in front of the sinner which would not otherwise be there if it were left from him to decide when he needed it.

In our contemporary society, the guilt-ridden individual casts about in many places for relief from his sense of sin, and one of the more popular havens lies in the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapists have been called the "confessors of the twentieth century." It would be well at this point to look at this form of alleviation of guilt and to compare it with what the Church has to offer in auricular confession.

On the surface, the similarities between psychotherapy and auricular confession are very close. The patient comes in with a sense of insecurity or guilt and discusses his inmost desires and feelings with the psychotherapist in a spirit of confidence. The psychotherapist provides an atmosphere of acceptance, and the penitent knows that no matter what he has done, he will always find acceptance from him no matter how shameful his attitudes might be. In this type of situation where the psychotherapist is very understanding, the patient finds that he can open up and confide his inmost fears and guilts to another and know that he is not alone with his problems. The process by which the patient does this is called "transference." Transference comes about when the acceptance by the psychotherapist is so complete that the patient is able to treat him as a figure in his childhood and so can relive the childhood experiences about which he is troubled. Through this experience of being able to relive past experiences with someone who is able to help him interpret them, the individual is enabled to differentiate between what is a real sense of guilt and what is a false sense. The theory underlying this process is that once one is able to see the truth about himself clearly, then he himself will be able to choose and to do what is right and most fulfilling for his own needs. This process is very valuable from a theological point of view in that it can condense and simplify for the Christian the problems with which he is confronted and it can save him from much needless worry about situations over which he has no control. Psychotherapy can help the Christian in terms of determining the "true voluntariness of a moral decision; it has much to teach him in regard to the influence of environment, heredity, and upbringing on the moral act."³ In short, psychotherapy can help separate the sins from the moral diseases. An act, in order to be sinful, must be committed voluntarily with the full consent of the will in order to be culpable, while a moral disease is a "morbid complex giving rise to uncontrollable impulses for which the individual cannot be held fully responsible."⁴ There is an area in which psychotherapy cannot deal however, and that is with real guilt. There is no provision in psychotherapy for absolving the penitent from guilt for action for which he alone is responsible — for those willful acts for which there can be no rationalization. It is up to the injured parties to forgive for this: God and the person against whom the sin has been committed.

3. Martin Thornton, *English Spirituality* (London, 1963), p. 302.

4. H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London, 1961), p. 43.

The essential difference between the approach of psychotherapy and confession is that psychotherapy is geared to deal with what lies in the unconscious, while confession is geared to handle that which lies in the realm of conscious acts of the will. As H. A. Williams describes it:

Our attitude to God, evoked by the way in which alone we can conceive him, is like an iceberg. A small amount appears above the surface of consciousness. Below is the vast submerged mass we do not see.⁵

In dealing with real guilt, the confessor does not allow the penitent to undergo any experience of transference, unlike the psychotherapist. The confessor remains uninvolved during the very brief session in order that his position as an "ear of God," which he holds by virtue of the fact that he is permitted to absolve sins in God's name, might be maintained;⁶ he does not permit the penitent to ramble freely about whatever might be on his mind at the time of the confession. The attitude and actions of the confessor discourage any type of personal relationship from developing during the time of the confession; he tries to remain a means through which God grants the penitent formal forgiveness, rather than an object on which the penitent may center his emotions in the working out of his problems, which lies in the area of pastoral counseling. The confession centers around objective guilt rather than the subjective feeling about what the penitent feels (other than an establishment of the fact that the penitent should show the proper amount of sorrow for the acts of sin which he has committed). The focal point of the confession is the absolution in which God reveals his acceptance of the sinner in spite of his sins, bringing him back into communion with himself because of his love.

In the eighteenth century, Francis White expressed the ends of auricular confession as being:

First, to inform, instruct, and counsel Christian people in their particular actions.

Secondly, if they are delinquents, to reprove them and make them understand the danger of their sin.

Thirdly, to comfort those that are afflicted, and truly penitent, and to assure them of remission of sins by the word of Absolution.

Fourthly, to prepare people to the worthy receiving of the Holy Communion.⁷

Confession can also be described as being much like a surgical removal of the sin which "obstructs the natural growth and function of the physical organism."⁸

The dynamics of auricular confession also differ from that of psychotherapy in that in the person of the confessor, one meets a personification of the entire congregation; the whole being found in the part. It is by means of confession to this individual that the Christian is again restored to fellowship with the whole.⁹ The purpose of making the confession in the presence of another Christian is that it is only in confessing to one who has made confessions of his own and who has experienced his own sin forgiven by the power of the Cross that one can have an experience of being forgiven by God without being judged by human standards. It is in the presence of a psychotherapist that one can allow himself to be sick, and in the presence of a forgiven Christian brother that one can allow himself to be a sinner. It is at the same time a

5. H. A. Williams, "Theology and Self Awareness," *Soundings*, A. R. Vidler, ed. (Cambridge, 1962), p. 77.

6. Francis J. Belton, *A Manual for Confessors* (London, 1955), pp. 128-129.

7. Francis White, "A Reply to Jesuit Fisher's Answer to Certain Questions Propounded by His Most Gracious Majesty, King James," *Anglicanism*, P. E. More and F. L. Cross, ed. (London, 1957), p. 515.

8. Williams, p. 78.

9. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, 1954), p. 113.

most humiliating experience to have to confess one's sins to one's peer, and it is because this humiliation is so hard that we continually scheme to evade confessing to a brother. Our eyes are blinded so that we no longer see the promise and the glory in such abasement.¹⁰

The glory in such abasement is that it is only in dying to our old way of life that we can be born again to a new relationship and communion with God. This death to our old sinful ways is necessary for us to be reunited to God after our willful separation from Him through our sin. Martin Luther makes it quite emphatic that he considers confession to be a necessary element of the Christian life in this respect:

when I admonish you to confession, I am admonishing you to be a Christian.¹¹

There are certain goals which both psychotherapy and religion have in common besides the obvious one which is the release which inevitably comes to those who "make a clean breast of things." Both disciplines strive to bring the individual back into his true and rightful state of being. From the psychotherapist's point of view the individual's state should be one of self fulfillment and enjoyment of life; from the confessor's point of view, it might be summed up by the opening words of the Westminster Confession of faith: that "man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." Both psychotherapy and religion operate under the theory that ultimate security lies in facing reality:

we reach security only by a trustful acceptance of the full truth about ourselves and others, not by evasion of it.¹²

Paul Tillich affirms that:

all religions pronounce that there is a healing power in reality . . . our healing or saving means acceptance of our finitude by the infinite.¹³

The difference between the two beliefs lies in that for psychotherapy reality lies in ourselves, while for Christianity it lies ultimately with God's will. It must also be said that psychotherapy can give us valuable insights into the reasons why people may sin; the fact that they do and what is to be done about it once they do commit sin is a question for which the Church must take full responsibility.¹⁴

In our contemporary society the need for auricular confession is great. It is impossible for one to become a follower of Christ and be an inheritor of the kingdom of God unless he dies to his old way of life and is born anew.¹⁵ The death to sin must be suffered by each Christian individually, so it would follow that in order for this to be done effectively one must make his confession as an individual. This calls for auricular confession. In our society of "short cuts" and easy requirements, the Church must beware of falling into the temptation of dispensing cheap grace — granting forgiveness to those who are not really penitent, but who are getting by on appearances. As the physician of souls the Church has the responsibility to see that those who "cannot quiet their consciences . . . and are troubled with any weighty matter" which cannot be relieved by the use of the general confession, be given the education and the opportunity to make a private one when the need arises. In order for this to be effectively accomplished, there are many problems which have to be solved, which are

10. Bonhoeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 118.

12. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

13. Paul Tillich, "Psychotherapy and a Christian Interpretation of Human Nature," *Review of Religion* (March, 1949), XIII, p. 267.

14. Mackintosh, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

15. John 3:3.

beyond the scope of this paper. One is the place of lay confession in the Church — must confession always be made in the presence of an ordained priest? Another is the popular identification of auricular confession with the high church party of the Church; how can this be separated from the churchmanship issue so that all may feel free to ask for auricular confession when they feel the need for it? Another problem which might be raised is the matter of establishing a working relationship between psychotherapy and the Church. They have much to offer each other as much of their work is complementary in nature, but at the moment there is much confusion of roles between the two fields.

In conclusion it might be said that if Kierkegaard is right in saying that “the opposite of sin is not virtue, but faith,”¹⁶ then the effective use of auricular confession might well result in an increase of faith in the saving work of Christ as a real answer to the problems of our present world. One comes to have faith by the experiences which he has had in seeing God operate in his life. Once one undergoes auricular confession, he no longer only *hears* about God, but he begins to *know* him for he has seen Him in action in breaking down the barriers which he himself has erected by his sin. In the *Shoes of the Fisherman*, the Pope, after discussing this issue with several of his business-hardened cardinals, points to a confessional and says:

Once a week I come and sit here for two hours, to hear the confession of anyone who chances to come. . . . You both know what this ministry of the tribunal is like. The good ones come. The bad ones stay away; but every so often there arrives the soul in distress, the one who needs a special co-operation from the confessor to lead him back to God. . . . It's a lottery always — a gamble on the moment and the man, and the fruitfulness of the Word one plucks from one's own heart. And yet there, in that stuffy little box, is the whole meaning of the Faith — the private speech of man with his Creator, myself between as man's servant and God's.¹⁷

16. Quoted in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

17. Morris L. West, *Shoes of the Fisherman* (New York, 1963), pp. 229-230.

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